



## Discentes

---

Volume 1

Issue 2 *Volume 1, Issue 2*

Article 5

---

4-28-2016

# Humanity Unbound: Hope for Mankind in a Bleak Drama

---

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <http://repository.upenn.edu/discentesjournal/vol1/iss2/5>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Humanity Unbound: Hope for Mankind in a Bleak Drama

# Humanity Unbound: Hope for Mankind in a Bleak Drama

By Ben Nicholas

“O sky divine, and winds swift-winged, and river-springs, and ocean waves’ bright laughter beyond counting, and earth the mother of all...look upon the kind of suffering I have, a god at the hand of gods!” shouts Prometheus, freshly chained to a distant, lofty cliff face in the empty and unforgiving wasteland of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* (88-91).<sup>38</sup> His cry expresses frustration at what appears to be a grand cosmic injustice. Prometheus assisted Zeus and his divine compatriots in overthrowing and replacing Prometheus’ own brethren as the rulers of all existence. But as the one member of the Greek pantheon who actively sought to place the needs of mankind above those of the gods, Prometheus now suffers the cruelest and most protracted punishment conceivable by the orders of his former ally Zeus (107-8). As the captain of this new divine regime, Zeus serves the role of the distant tyrant. Though totally absent from the events of the play, his agents enthusiastically carry out his vindictive and unrelenting will. At first, ancient and modern observers of Aeschylus’ drama may wonder alike: what has become of the relationship between man and god? If the cosmic ruler of Greece has fettered the one and only divine benefactor of mankind, what hope can there be for the fate of the mortal world? Although Aeschylus appears to paint a bleak theological picture through a fettered Prometheus and a distant, oppressive Zeus in his *Prometheus Bound*, the

---

<sup>38</sup> All translations of Aeschylus are from Christopher Collard, trans. *Persians and Other Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

interactions between Prometheus and the other characters of the play reveal that hope for mankind can be found not only in the Titan's relationships with said characters and in the ambiguous character of Zeus but also in the potential for reconciliation between the two deities.

It is difficult to deny that the events of *Prometheus Bound* are built upon a foundation which could initially leave an observer with a grim view of mankind's future. Aeschylus' play is related to a particular episode of Hesiod's *Theogony*, a work which describes the genealogies and activities of the ancient Greek deities. In it, we are given the story of Prometheus with which ancient observers of *Prometheus Bound* would have been familiar. Hesiod indicates that Prometheus, the clairvoyant Titan son of the Titan Iapetus, is by nature a "crooked-schemer" whose promortal activities tend to receive more punishment for both himself and mankind than are worth the effort (Hesiod *Theogony* 545-49).<sup>39</sup> After realizing that Prometheus had attempted to fool him into accepting the lesser-quality cut of a sacrifice so that the better portion would be left for the humans, Zeus punitively deprives mankind of fire. Ever the proponent of mankind, Prometheus clandestinely retrieves the confiscated flame and returns it to the humans, though this only invites further Zeus' wrath. In retaliation, Zeus exacts vengeance upon mankind by calling on the other gods not only to craft the first woman, "a bane for mortal men," but also to fetter the slippery Prometheus to a distant mountain, his cunning now useless before the power of the gods (535-610). Hesiod states that Prometheus will one day be rescued by Heracles (a descendent of Zeus; 525-30), but otherwise paints an admittedly disheartening picture in which the race of man suffers the collateral damage of a conflict

---

<sup>39</sup> All translations of Hesiod are from M. L. West, trans. *Theogony and Works and Days*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

between their only divine benefactor and a seemingly misanthropic Olympian. If Aeschylus relates the same story in *Prometheus Bound* as Hesiod in his *Theogony*, how can the playwright give any more hope to us than the poet?

Aeschylus first begins to reveal Prometheus' association with hope for mankind through the Titan's interactions with the chorus. Shortly following his fettering and abandonment by Hephaestus and the agents of Zeus, Prometheus is startled by the approach of the chorus, made up of the daughters of the sea god Oceanus. The chorus laments the suffering Titan, asking why he had been shackled. Prometheus responds that he received this punishment from Zeus for opposing the god's plan to destroy mankind, but later explains that his support of mortals involved more than simply giving them fire (Aesch. *PB* 226-41). He also made significant cultural contributions to the development of the human race, such as granting them intelligence and various skills (436-71, 476-506). So great was Prometheus' compassion that he even abolished the ability of mortals to foresee their own deaths by instead implanting "blind hopes" within their minds (247-50). Finally, Prometheus reveals to the chorus how he may once again freely serve man in this capacity as he possesses knowledge of how Zeus may be dethroned (167-71), how the Titan himself will be released (870-3), and how he and Zeus may come to terms in the future (190-2). Thus, Aeschylus' Prometheus embodies hope for mankind both as the source of all human progress and also as a literal giver of hope to mortals who may one day freely return to his pro-human agenda without Zeus' opposition. But there can be no hope for the human race unless we know with certitude that on the day of his freedom Prometheus will engage in the same advocacy of humanity which earned his imprisonment. How can we be sure this traumatic experience will not break the goodwill of this Titan?

Prometheus' unbending desire to assist others is revealed during the play through a series of paradoxical episodes of the imprisoned helping the free. Following Prometheus' lamentation with the daughters of Oceanus, the sea god himself majestically arrives on a griffin. Drawn to Prometheus' plight out of a sense of divine "kinship," Oceanus proceeds to dispense lofty advice to the chained deity (283-90). Oceanus counsels Prometheus to set aside his anger (so as to avert further punishment from the chief god) and allow the sea god to negotiate with Zeus for Prometheus's release. Oceanus' overconfidence in his own advice reaches condescension as he proclaims himself the "teacher" of the tortured Titan (307-29).

Though leaving behind his anger may one day prove useful, Prometheus recognizes the fatal misstep Oceanus is poised to take by attempting to dissuade an infuriated and powerful Zeus from his current design. "No," exhorts Prometheus, "stay quiet, and keep yourself out of the way; for even in my misfortune, I would wish it to harm as few as possible" (344-6). Oceanus remains unconvinced until Prometheus instructively likens the sea god's "wasted effort and simple-minded foolishness" to that which earned the Titan his current punishment (376-88). "Your disaster is my teacher, Prometheus!" exclaims Oceanus (391). Humbled by the superior wisdom of the *true* "teacher" on the stage, he mounts his griffin and vanishes. Though Prometheus may have profited from an attempt made at intercession on his behalf, his own selflessness directs him to steer an aspiring savior away from destruction at the hands of an angered god.

Following more lamentation from the chorus, the mortal Io rushes onto the stage in the form of a maddened cow. Once a beautiful Argive maiden who had caught the lustful eye of Zeus, Io suffered the wrath of a jealous Hera through transformation into a heifer driven across the world

by the unrelenting bites of a gadfly (640-85). As the only mortal character in this play, Io serves as the sole representative of a human race which now shares in the pain of Prometheus (as the chorus proclaims; 411-4). If she can be saved, so can mankind.

In her torment, Io begs the clairvoyant Prometheus to reveal to her how much longer she must endure her agony before it finally ends (605-6). In an attempt to comfort her, Prometheus responds with the requested vision of the future. Though she still has a long and perilous road to travel, she will someday be healed by Zeus and give birth to a line which will become a royal family in Argos (a member of which will be the one to unfetter Prometheus himself). Io expresses dismay at her future perils, and the bites of the gadfly eventually compel her to rush away in reignited madness, leaving us little reason to believe Prometheus actually succeeded in calming her (823-86). But Prometheus' words have indeed benefitted the afflicted mortal, as she now knows that her painful journey will one day end and will also lead her to the motherhood of a prosperous family which will rescue man's divine benefactor.<sup>40</sup>

The episodes of Oceanus and Io reveal that although Prometheus currently suffers for helping mankind, his torture is insufficient to bend his character away from the same selflessness which earned him the punishment in the first place. His inevitable freedom will indeed be mankind's salvation with the exception of one obstacle: the opposition of a vengeful Zeus. If this god remains a misanthropic tyrant and the struggle between the two deities persists, the Titan's freedom will be meaningless to the welfare of mankind.

Since the character of Zeus is totally absent from the events of the play, it is clear that he is a distant figure in

---

<sup>40</sup> Stephen White, "Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in Prometheus Bound." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 121.

*Prometheus Bound*, but is he truly tyrannical? The first to answer “no” to this question may very well have been an Athenian viewing this play as it was performed for the first time onstage. Aeschylus presents a Zeus in his drama who may have seemed totally alien to the version of Greek mythology presented by Hesiod. While the Hesiodic Zeus possesses supreme power and exerts an inescapable will on mortals, he is not necessarily depicted as malignant.<sup>41</sup>

Despite Zeus’ absence from the stage, his agents Power, Force (a mute character), and Hermes—all of whom collectively represent his will—reinforce an image of an apparently tyrannical god. At the start of the play, Power relentlessly commands a reluctant Hephaestus to fetter Prometheus as tightly and painfully as possible; he is overbearing and unforgiving in his efforts to fulfill Zeus’ designs (2-81). At the end of the play, Hermes interrogates Prometheus in a manner which has been likened to that of “contemporary brainwashing techniques”<sup>42</sup> and announces the cataclysm sent by Zeus which engulfs the obstinate Prometheus at the end of the play (943-1035).

However, these very same episodes which appear to paint a picture of a despotic Zeus also undermine such an image. As Hephaestus hesitates in shackling Prometheus, Power presses the god onward by asking him if he does not fear the retribution of Zeus should he fail in his task more than he fears betraying his divine relative Prometheus. Hephaestus replies “Yes, but you are always ruthless and overbearing” (36-42). It is *Power*, not Zeus, who compels Hephaestus to chain the Titan to the cliff. Similarly, although the great disaster at the play’s end is supposedly delivered by

---

<sup>41</sup> William Allan. “Divine Justice and Cosmic Order in Early Greek Epic.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 126 (2006): 28.

<sup>42</sup> C. J. Herington. “Introduction to *Prometheus Bound*.” *Arion* 1, no. 4. (1973/1974): 650.



Zeus, it is *Hermes*, not Zeus, who is physically associated with it by cruelly heralding its onset (1015-7). Even as the representatives of an apparently tyrannical god, Power and Hermes offer only a peripheral picture of a Zeus who, in the words of Stephen White, “never appears or utters a word; all we hear is what others say about him.”<sup>43</sup> The total absence of the character of Zeus from Aeschylus’ drama and the displacement of his negative qualities on others creates a depiction of Zeus which is necessarily ambiguous. Is he really a tyrant who will forever oppress mankind? A closer reading of the major episodes of this play reveals quite the opposite.

While Prometheus presents his own predicament to Oceanus as evidence for why the sea god should abandon his endeavor of interceding on behalf of the Titan, he employs other examples as well. As further evidence for Zeus’ ability to malign others, Prometheus describes how this captain of the gods not only punished Prometheus’ brother Atlas by obligating him to hold up the sky but also brutally burnt and imprisoned the monster Typhon (344-72).<sup>44</sup>

Overtly, Oceanus seems to turn tail for fear of receiving similar retribution for opposing the designs of Zeus. However, Oceanus’ departure instead reflects a higher mythical understanding. Atlas’ weighty task is necessary to keep separate the mortal and divine realms while Typhon’s imprisonment is crucial for relegating the beast’s destructive forces to a “netherworld” of sorts. In this light, Zeus’ actions appear not as acts of retribution but as acts of creation necessary to establish a world differentiated into earth, heaven, and hell. This is not a world of divine retribution; it is simply an ordered world that man can inhabit. By this logic,

---

<sup>43</sup> White, Stephen. “Io’s World: Intimations of Theodicy in Prometheus Bound.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 109.

<sup>44</sup> Both of these accounts are verified by Hesiod (Hes. *Th.* 516-21, 820-68).

Prometheus' struggle with Zeus may be symbolic of a moment in the development of the cosmos in which intellect and power must first be diametrically opposed before order can be achieved.<sup>45</sup> Oceanus did not flee the captive Titan's cliff face for fear of Zeus' wrath but rather for fear of disrupting a necessary process of creating an ordered world. Zeus the tyrant becomes Zeus the creator.

The episode concerning Io can be read in a similar light. Io suffers, but only *indirectly* by the machinations of Zeus. Her immediate maligner was in fact Hera, and Prometheus predicts that her *direct* healer will be Zeus. Furthermore, he predicts that it is Zeus who will unite with Io to plant the seed of the royal Argive line to which she shall give birth—the same line from which Prometheus' rescuer will emerge (844-76). In the *Suppliants*, another play by Aeschylus, we learn the conclusion of Io's tale from the proclamations of her very own Argive descendants: "Taking Zeus' freight in her womb.../ she bore him a son without fault, /...whence the whole land cries out, / 'Truly this is the child of Zeus, / who makes life grow!'" (Aesch. *Supp.* 580-5). These are not the cries of mortals suppressed by a despot but rather those of humans grateful for the munificence of their chief god. He has healed the afflicted Io and impregnated her with the first of a line of humans who will rule over their own realm. This Zeus is no oppressor of mankind. Rather, his actions support mortal society and even grant it a degree of autonomous authority. Zeus the misanthrope becomes Zeus the savior.

While it was indeed a vengeful Zeus who threatened to

---

<sup>45</sup> David Konstan. "The Ocean Episode in the 'Prometheus Bound.'" *History of Religions* 17, no. 1 (Aug. 1977): 67-70. Konstan argues that, since Aeschylus would have witnessed the rise of democracy out of tyranny in his own city-state of Athens, it seems logical that he might have adopted the view that order can only be established as a resolution to tension and opposition.

extinguish mankind by confiscating fire and also ordered man's advocate chained, the ambiguity of his character in *Prometheus Bound* allows the reader to look beyond these actions and instead consider the greater significance of Zeus to humans in this play. In fact, his promotion of mankind as revealed in the episodes of Oceanus and Io demonstrates that his roles in both creating an ordered world in which mortals can exist and also in overcompensating humans for the wrongs of other gods far surpass even Prometheus' advocacy for humans.

Hope still endures for mankind. Prometheus will, on the day of his inevitable release, endeavor to support the mortal world with the same fervor as before, and given the true nature of Zeus, the god of gods will not oppose him. Still, we are left with one final problem. Among his many predictions, Prometheus foresaw the dethronement of Zeus at the hands of the chief god's own son, born to the sea goddess Thetis, who is fated to "bear a son mightier than his father" (Aesch. *PB* 752-67). Prometheus is faced with a choice: exact vengeance upon his indomitable adversary by withholding the identity of the fatal consort (and in so doing risk destabilization of the cosmic order which depends upon Zeus), or warn Zeus of his potential folly for the sake of preserving mankind. Unfortunately, the Titan's decision is not concretely known as the sequel in which it occurs—*Prometheus Unbound*—has been lost save for a few fragments. However, reconstructions of the sequel's plot by classicists seem to indicate that Prometheus most likely chooses to set aside the one thing he has not yet sacrificed for mankind—his pride—and warns Zeus of the impending danger to save his beloved mortal race.<sup>46</sup>

Though *Prometheus Bound* begins with a struggle

---

<sup>46</sup> George Thomson. *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*, 2nd ed. (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1972), 331-6.

between a benefactor of mankind and an uncharacteristically malevolent god, the play reveals that the Titan is unshakable in his service to man, and that Zeus is not inherently malevolent but rather a greater servant of humanity than Prometheus himself. These revelations suggest that both deities will set aside their differences and reconcile in the sequel, ensuring the survival of mankind. Aeschylus thus offers his audience much hope in this drama, and an ancient audience would have been able to enjoy an entire trilogy of Aeschylus' optimistic theology. Only the first play has survived the course of history, however, leaving the moment of Prometheus' possible reconciliation with Zeus forever in the dark. Regardless of this limitation, our Promethean inheritance from Aeschylus sufficiently communicates his message through the single play of *Prometheus Bound* by giving his modern audience nothing less than hope itself.

## References

- Aeschylus. *Persians and Other Plays*. Translated by C. Collard. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Allan, William. "Divine Justice and Cosmic Order in Early Greek Epic." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 126 (2006): 1-35.
- Herington, C. J. "Introduction to Prometheus Bound." *Arion* 1, no. 4 (1973/1974): 640-667.
- Hesiod. *Theogony and Works and Days*, 2nd ed. Translated by M. L. West. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Konstan, David. "The Ocean Episode in the 'Prometheus Bound.'" *History of Religions* 17, no. 1 (Aug. 1977): 61-72.
- Otis, Brooks. *Cosmos & Tragedy: An Essay on the Meaning of Aeschylus*. Edited by E. C. Kopff. Chapel Hill, NC:

University of North Carolina Press, 1981.

Thomson, George. *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*, 2nd ed. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1972.

White, Stephen. "Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in Prometheus Bound." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 107-140.

**Note:** This paper was originally written for Professor Jeremy McInerney's Fall 2012 course ANCH 026: Ancient Greece.

---